

The Great Sinner

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Translated from the Russian by

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To N.K.I.

The train stopped in Vilnius for an hour. I jumped down from the upper berth and dressed quickly. Vera was lying facing the wall. That didn't change anything; I knew very well she didn't look any worse. "Girls rob you of your looks," she'd said that day, on the eve of their departure, after she'd called her Lithuanian girlfriend. "You're going to laugh, but I did some special figuring of my own so that it would be a boy." I didn't laugh. Neither did she. The person whose fate we'd decided then had given no signs of life at all. But he'd already had a name. Sashka. Aleksandr Sergeevich. . . . I had gotten myself thoroughly fouled up in my sweater and was swearing but good. Alongside our half-empty compartment someone slowed for a moment but then moved on. I looked at the back of Vera's neck.

"Maybe you'll step out for some air?"

"I'm not getting a bad breeze here."

"Well, you know best. Bring you anything?"

"Flowers."

"What?"

"A joke."

I kept on standing right where I was. More than anything I loved her hair, which smelled of wild strawberries.

"Go on, go on. Go look at the Old Town."

"What haven't I seen there?"

"The Church of the Holy Ghost, for instance. Or even better, the Catholic church. I'd go if I were you."

I didn't say anything.

"From the train station take a right, then a left across the square. Go under the arch right by it. Go on--you won't be sorry."

If I could just perch on the very edge and run my hands over her hair . . .

"Well, shall I go?"

"Godspeed."

"I'll be right back."

"I hope so."

I softly closed the door behind me--as if it were a hospital ward.

It was drizzling. Other faces, other awnings. The way into a kind of inner courtyard was barred by a garland of fresh flowers. A crenellated pyramid of cake on a snow-white cloth. I knew how to say it in Lithuanian: shakotis. I also knew this was no place for me.

Following Vera's instructions, I passed under the arch. On the right I saw the Catholic church. I went over to a man to ask where the Church of the Holy Ghost was, but no sooner had I opened my mouth than he stuck out his hand. That flustered me. I fished in my pocket for change--not a kopek. Just a bill. A touchy situation, I must say. Saying I'm sorry and hiding my money in my pocket would mean placing an exact price on my ex-

excuses. Doubtless tuned into my waffling, the beggar waited patiently. I put the money into his outstretched palm. The beggar chuckled--yes, he chuckled--and uttered with virtually no accent: "So you finally came." His words bothered me. Maybe he'd mistaken me for someone else? Or was he toying with me? The old man's blue eyes were serious. Sad even. He blew on his fingers, which poked out of raggedy mittens (where had he managed to stash the money?), and fixed his gaze on me. "Let's go." "Where?" I didn't understand. People were passing us going in and out of the church. "I have a train," I said, and mechanically looked at my watch. And then the beggar--he'd already taken several steps--said something that made me shudder. "Go on. You won't be sorry," he said. Vera's words. Pure coincidence, I thought, but a strange unease had already managed to overtake me. I followed the beggar.

The paved courtyard he led me to served as an outdoor terrace for a small bar. Life positively seethed inside, in the murk--the hubbub at the bar, the flickering of the lamps, the rhythm of the reggae--but out here oval plastic tables and plastic chairs stood forlorn. All of them, understandably, were empty. We sat down at the farthest table, cater-corner to the open doors of the bar.

"In forty years there's come to be less blood," said the beggar.

"Blood?"

"On the soles of the feet. When they kiss the feet, it wears away the blood."

I didn't grasp right off that he was talking about the

crucifix.

"It's salty," the beggar continued. "When you squeeze the wound with your lips, it seems like the blood should stop right away. Sooner or later that happens. . . . You see how many believers there are. I'm telling you--it used to flow harder."

"You're talking about the crucifix?" I inquired just to be sure.

He might just as well not have heard my question.

"At the time I was--how does that one go?--kneehigh to a grasshopper. My older sister was instructing me. She'd taught me the Latin letters, and once I read for myself "mater misericordia" on the wall above the church gates. When you go back you'll see it. We were kneeling before the Holy Virgin, and my sister was tossing a few coins in the offery . . . that was back when we still belonged to bourgeois Poland."

"I have a train," I reminded him nervously.

The old man took a deep sniff and rolled his eyes dreamily:

"Coffee!"

In all likelihood he hadn't shaved since his last cup of coffee. Although his hair was light brown his beard was reddish, untouched by gray.

"We arrived at the church early in the morning, my sister used to say you shouldn't pray on a full stomach. But that man had arrived even earlier. One time we arrived right when it was opening and we still found him there, and then I knew he didn't go home. 'Can you really sleep in a church?' I asked. 'He doesn't sleep,' my sister replied, displeased. 'What on earth

does he do there all night?' I wouldn't let up. 'Keep it down. A fine place this is for questions.' I realized she didn't want to talk about this man."

I took a look at my watch. Twenty-five minutes until the train left. The station was a stone's throw away, right now

(This man. Why do I have to listen to his prattle about some insomniac religious fanatic?)

right now I'm going to get up and put an end to this once and for all. Needless to say, I didn't.

"He looked old," the beggar continued, "older than my father, although neither one of them was yet forty. Maybe he seemed that old because I never saw his eyes? I mean, his eyes were always closed. He knelt at the very bottom of the steps, telling his beads, like this (the beggar folded his tattered mittens in front of him) and moved his lips, like my sister. We came and went, but he stayed and stayed. In the same place by the wall all the time, so as not to be a nuisance."

In the bar someone whistled--on a bet, evidently. The indignant voice of the manager of the establishment, who had shouted something in Lithuanian, was drowned in the general laughter.

"But he wasn't always in the same place." The beggar smiled at me. He turned out to have more teeth in his mouth than one might have imagined. "He was ascending!" he added after a calculated pause."

(If I don't get up this second . . .)

Blue eyes watched me with unconcealed curiosity: well, what about your train?

"You don't find this interesting?"

I remembered: "Go on. You won't be sorry." Really, why should I let my sides go to sleep in a warm compartment? Why shouldn't I let the autumn rain refresh me in tandem with this talkative beggar? Lord, what's Vera going to think? And where, I'd like to know, am I going to spend the night? Something will turn up, I assured myself, your new friend will arrange fashionable quarters for you.

"Very," I said out loud. And I politely reminded him: "You said that he was ascending."

"Yes! One step each day! Altogether imperceptible, you see. Only after a couple of weeks did I realize that he was almost to the middle of the stairs."

"And what did your older sister say?"

"I didn't ask. The whole town was already talking about him. That's a whole story in itself, but if you're in a hurry. . . ."

I wiped a drop of rain off my watch: there goes my train slowly picking up speed, and Vera is looking out the window for me and utterly at a loss.

"Not any more."

The question sparkled in his eyes before he asked it:

"Why don't we have ourselves some hot coffee?"

"Why not . . ." I clapped the chest pocket of my windbreaker--my wallet was still there. "Why let this place kill us?"

Inside I got us each a large cup of coffee and a dish of

said they got stuck in his teeth, but he fell greedily on the coffee. Two cubes of sugar he immediately pocketed.

The coffee was so-so, but I only realized that when I'd drained the cup in three swallows. What do you know, the rain seemed to be letting up.

"We have a district here, Antakalnis--Antokol in Polish. Before the war the well-to-do lived there. Store owners, doctors, university professors. Dr. Miltinis lived in a two-story house with his wife, two children, and a servant. But he was not the principal figure in the house. Everything was "decided" by Herr Littbarski--a chocolate-colored spaniel that always slept in the daughter's room. That's what they called the dog, after his former master, a German, a patient of Miltinis's. The German had given him in gratitude to the doctor as a month-old puppy. Anyone finding himself in the doctor's house for the first time would find it next to impossible to understand. For instance, the talk turns to the Anschluss. The doctor, tapping his pipe, would say: "Herr Littbarski considers the Anschluss a shameful interlude for Germany, but while blaming his compatriots he is nevertheless convinced that the English deserve to be swung around by the tail." If one of the guests praised the lamb chops, the doctor's wife would explain: "I had nothing to do with it, Mr. Littbarski selects our meat." Eleven-year-old Lina in particular spoiled the dog. From the very first day she claimed the puppy. She was six when the puppy was brought into the house, and from that moment on it took the place of dolls for her. At first it was her "little one," later he might be a mailman, pediatrician, balloon seller, circus acrobat, or even

mailman, pediatrician, balloon seller, circus acrobat, or even "Uncle Vitautas from Toronto." Once a week Lina bathed him. She picked the burrs from his paws, then filled the children's bath, where once she herself had bathed, with warm water, fastened his long ears together on top of his head with a clothespin, and then soaped him, rinsed him, soaped and rinsed him again, the whole time quietly reprimanding him for his bad habit of picking up all the dust in the yard. Littbarski patiently endured her not entirely just accusations, only when water splashed in his ear he involuntarily jerked back his snout and sniffed: mff."

As I listened to this whiskery tramp in the worn out, secondhand coat I was more and more impressed by his correct speech, and most important his ability to draw an utterly real picture in a few words. Who was he, damn it? In any case--a born storyteller.

"Lina's brother was graduating. There was no question: he would follow in his father's footsteps. At that time there were no entrance exams for medical school, as there are now, it was all a matter of money, and there was plenty of money in the family. But in his day the doctor had had to struggle before he could take up a respected position in society, and he was not looking for an easy life for his son. 'If you don't want to eat, then don't,' he often repeated, 'but forgive me, I cannot chew for you.' And Valdas chewed valiantly. He came to detest Rabelais for Gargantua. His own childhood seemed to him an uninterrupted act of gluttony. At one time he was chewing grammar, then swallowed whole books about the great philosophers

Each new dish was served with the sauce of 'financial independence' and 'social good,' but somehow none of it ever did anything for his appetite. When they got him a tutor, Valdas became all the more depressed."

Hey, that coat of his isn't secondhand, I thought apropos of nothing. No, and . . .

"Miltinis had known Stanislav since his student days, although the other had been a year or two behind him. Now you wouldn't recognize him. A thirty-six-year-old bachelor. Assistant professor in the college of surgery. Articles in substantial journals. Tutor the boy? Stanislav put a fruit drop in his mouth, which was a mark of hesitation for him. Nevertheless he agreed . . . solely for their alma mater's sake, and proceeded to name a fee so steep that Dr. Miltinis told his wife a figure half as much."

(Where does he get these details?)

"But then the boy's affairs soon improved. He even revealed a definite interest in science. In any event, one day he asked his father: 'Why does a person have so many internal organs if no one can see them?' Lessons over, the tutor usually stayed for dinner. At dinner they talked about whatever they liked, as long as it wasn't medicine. More than anything, Stanislav liked to joke about the wonderful bride that was growing up in the house. He even thought up a game called 'If I were her fiance.' If I were her fiance, said Stanislav, I would learn Spanish, buy a guitar, and serenade her outside her window at night. No, he immediately corrected himself, I would ask Mr. Littbarski to give me his place alongside his mistress's bed. "I trust you won't

me his place alongside his mistress's bed. "I trust you won't object?" he peeked under the table, where the spaniel was anticipating his rightful bone. In reply the dog made a guttural sound, and Stanislav loudly announced: "Well then, it's agreed!" Everyone laughed. Lina was at the point of tears she was so embarrassed. And at the next dinner he started in again. In the beginning Miltinis found it funny. In his heart of hearts he was impressed at how imaginatively his colleague came up with newer and newer proofs of his chivalrous devotion each time. But one day he caught Stanislav staring at his daughter, and all of a sudden it occurred to him that his colleague wasn't joking. He shared his doubts with his wife . . . who laughed at him. Yes, our Lina is a pretty little thing. Who would argue? But she's just a child. A child? Miltinis didn't try to argue, but stealing looks at his daughter, he became more and more convinced that unbeknownst to them the child had turned into a little woman. It seemed like only yesterday she'd been acting up over her mother sending her to her room, but now! How she'd changed ever since this strange man had appeared in their house! Next to her Valdas was a little boy. And how she blushed at compliments. And the main thing, she liked this game with its hints and innuendos. It was obvious--she liked it!"

My puzzling acquaintance seemed to forget for an instant his role as impartial narrator. A strange fire ignited in his eyes, although it immediately was extinguished. It seemed to me he was annoyed with himself for getting carried away.

"More coffee?" I asked, so as to change the subject.

"You're very kind."

You're very kind. That got my attention. Wasn't that rather ceremonious for a street tramp? There was somewhat more of a crowd in the bar now. A few raincoats were drying out on the hooks, but some people, I noticed, had kept their coats on at the table. I ordered coffee and ham sandwiches. Then I saw they had liquor, and I ordered a drink. Contrary to expectation, my insides, which had been all wound up the past two days, didn't unwind. Even worse, an unaccountable horror suddenly took hold of me. I felt like running away--right away, this instant. I swear to God, had I seen another exit in the bar at that second I would have skipped out to the street without another thought. What it was--I don't know. Whether it was the lightning realization of the monstrosity of what Vera had done at my insistence or a premonition of a cruel denouement--it actually took my breath away. I made myself go out on the terrace.

"Oh, what luxury!" The tramp fastidiously picked the sandwich up off the plate by the edge and raised it to his eyes. "Mm hmm. This isn't your real ham, although naturally . . ." He was making a valiant effort to remove all trace of expression from his face, giving me to understand that he ate ham sandwiches every other day at the very least.

"Where's the nearest hotel here?" I asked.

He gestured off to the left.

"If you explain everything to them there," he said with a full mouth, "maybe they'll let you stay, too."

He said there, or did I mishear? Who was I supposed to explain what to?

"The best-tasting coffee is with butter," he interrupted my thoughts. "You roast the beans in butter and then you grind them, and well then all the rest. It's so filling--you don't need any breakfast at all."

(. . . maybe they'll let you stay, too. Too?)

"Well, what happened after that?" The question burst out of itself. I'd had my suspicions about what happened after that, and the last thing I wanted was to be confirmed in them.

"After that? After the entrance examinations Dr. Miltinis, as promised, brought his son to Nida. There, overlooking the gray bay, amidst the sand and pines, stands the house of Thomas Mann. Mann was his idol. He'd long dreamed of showing his son the place where the ghosts of Joseph and his perfidious brothers roamed. The plan had been for the whole family to go, but Lina was under the weather, and her mother left her in a servant's care. By night the girl had spiked a temperature. Fortunately, alongside was someone upon whom she could always depend. Stanislav took meticulous care of his patient. Our little doll, he repeated several times, is about to turn into a true butterfly. Is there any danger? asked the servant. Stanislav smiled in reply. However, when the servant wanted to leave he became anxious for some reason and tried to keep her there. But half an hour later--strange, isn't it?--he saw her on her way. He called upon himself to safeguard the girl's well-being. Yes. He'd have done better to leave it with Mr. Littbarski."

The old man turned his empty cup over, paused, turned it over again, and began studying the image in the coffee grounds.

The silence lengthened, but I didn't dare break it.

"When the Miltinises returned, they found a madman in their home. Stanislav was obsessed with fixing Lina's blanket. No sooner did a bare heel or a frail hand poke out than he hastened to cover it. It seemed as if the mere sight of them caused him inexpressible suffering. They found the servant there as well. The only thing they could get out of her was that Lina raved constantly and the dog refused to eat. The doctor unceremoniously put the servant out of the bedroom, and Mrs. Miltinis led Stanislav away with difficulty. Left alone, the doctor threw back the blanket. . . . Well, what I'm going to tell you now you have probably all figured out yourself."

(Fourteen weeks, they told Vera after the examination. Where have you been all this time? It already has everything--hands, feet. And if it's a boy . . .)

I didn't take my eyes off the old man.

"Tell me, did the doctor call the police?"

"So that the whole town could know about it the next day?"

"Yes, but . . .

"You're too young to judge such things. The doctor didn't inform the police--not then and not later--he didn't even say anything about it to his wife. He simply did everything within his powers--and more--to save the daughter."

"So you mean . . ."

"No. True, after about three weeks the doctor felt the danger had passed--her fever had dropped somewhat, and Lina's look seemed to be more comprehending. But that was only a brief remission. Very soon after her . . . she . . ."

(Our Lina's very pretty, who would argue, but she's merely a child.)

He fell silent, as did I. Nonetheless, I couldn't keep from asking the decisive question:

"And what about that . . ."--for some reason I found it difficult to make myself pronounce his name out loud--"what about that . . . man? Did he run away?"

"When Lina died, he made a full confession to the priest."

"He confessed? But how could you ever know that?" ("If not from the man himself?" nearly flew from my tongue.)

"The priest," the old man blurted out. "The priest said so later."

"He violated the sanctity of confession."

The old man hesitated.

"Had the man been alive, then naturally . . . but that was later, when he . . ."

"Understood. And what did that . . . man . . . say then? After all, it's no longer any secret, is it?"

"He said it had been a delusion. Desire," he said, "had dimmed his reasoning. He also said that he would lay hands on himself if suicide weren't considered the worst sin of all."

"Yes, I can understand him. I can guess what the priest advised him. Go to the police and confess."

"You're right--about going to the police. But it wasn't the priest who told him that but Stanislav himself. The priest said that that wouldn't save him. He said that no punishment would ever let him redeem his sin. Because that is the greatest sin of

(And if it's a boy . . .)

As a child, I recall, there were times when I didn't know where to put my hands, but I never suspected that one day I might not know where to put my look.

"He lay a penance on him--in the Church of St. Theresa, next to where we're sitting: to mount the stairs on his knees, one step a day, until he reached the chapel where the image of the Mother of God is kept. He gave him permission to spend his nights in the church, so that he wouldn't violate his vow. Stanislav was supposed to begin his penitential ascent on Sunday." The old man fell silent briefly. "As he descended the stone stairs after confession he counted the steps to the chapel himself--there turned out to be forty-one . . . exactly the same number of steps as days Lina lived after that terrible night. This coincidence made a strong impression on him. He had come to believe that if he offered up prayers day after day for the wrongful end to her short life he would be able to redeem his great sin. . . . He was allowed to take a few biscuits and a flask of water. He was commanded to maintain silence for the entire duration of his ascent. On Sunday, before the start of early mass, he was already standing on his knees at the foot of the stairs."

The evening had thickened. Imperceptibly the bar had filled up, and different music had been coming from there for a long time--the light-hearted reggae had long since been replaced by nostalgic Sinatra.

Lost in thought, old man Miltinis tapped his fingernail against the dish that held the last ham sandwich--which looked

against the dish that held the last ham sandwich--which looked utterly artificial.

I broke the silence.

"I'm to understand that Pan Stanislav passed the forty-first step and the Virgin Mary absolved him of his great sin?"

The old man smiled--for the second time that evening.

"There turned out to be forty."

"?"

"Pan Stanislav must have miscounted. The stairs came to an end, and suddenly he knew that he was fated never to wipe away this curse, not tomorrow, not in a year. It would be with him to the end of his days. The chapel with the image of the Mother of God was two steps away, but he realized that he would never take them."

"Do you mean to say . . ."

"I mean to say that at that moment vengeance was taken. There was no sense in continuing."

"Forgive me. You seem to have left something out. How did it end?"

"End?" The face of Dr. Miltinis became sadly resigned, as if he had been entrusted with a certain secret and he was not in his rights to share that secret with a single living soul. "They said that he collapsed down the stairs and cracked his head. But he may not have. What's the difference." The old man stood up. "It's time for me to go."

"But Dr. Miltinis?" I couldn't restrain myself.

"Miltinis?" He shoved his icy hands into the pockets of his

"Wait . . ."

But he was walking away--unbroken, lightfooted, his long shock of hair untouched by gray.

I recalled the words he'd said--an exact copy of Vera's. Now that didn't seem a mere coincidence to me. I even had the thought that the picture painted by my imagination of the train pulling away bore no relationship to reality. Vera had not looked for me out the window, had not gone wild . . . she hadn't been expecting me to make the train at all because she--

(she knew)

knew? Come off it now. But if not? Unlike me, after all, she'd been here, and more than once. And if she'd seen that Miltinis? Heard his story? Let's suppose so. And so? I don't need Miltinis to recognize the extent of my guilt. All the same each person has his own guilt . . . his own staircase. And his own number of stairs. Just because some Stanislav miscounted there, that doesn't mean . . . Stop! The doctor pulled a fast one. He left something out. . . . (I'd already jumped up to run after him, but thinking better of it, had sat down.) Wait a minute, wait a minute. When we'd been talking about the Old Town, Vera had told me . . . had told me about the Church of the Holy Ghost. Exactly. She advised me to drop by. I felt an irony in her words. Drop by the Church of the Holy Ghost, she says . . . or . . .

(Or, even better, the Catholic church.)

Once again I jumped up and stepped quickly to the doors of the Catholic church.

Opposite the entrance stood a wooden crucifix--as before,

Opposite the entrance stood a wooden crucifix--as before, Christ's feet were bleeding. On the right I saw a stone staircase leading upward. Some old woman was struggling with the steep ascent. I swooped up the stairs--and stopped dead in my tracks. On the upper landing a very gray-haired man was kneeling with his back to me. I walked over to one side of him and saw: lowered lids, the taught-skinned face of an ascetic. His arthritically deformed fingers could not possibly have dealt with the amber rosary beads. I gazed into that lifeless face, trying to read at least something in it. A vain effort. But then the old man's eyelids raised up, our eyes met. . . .

(Because that is the most terrible sin of all--the murder of a child.)

I didn't run down the stairs, I flew, nearly knocking down the old woman. I raced down the street as if I were being pursued by a swarm of demons. That was him! I had read eternal torment in his eyes. And that's all? There are things that we are afraid to admit even to ourselves. Eternal torment--yes . . . but it wasn't that that had turned my soul inside out. There was something else in his eyes:

Next Sunday. A few biscuits and a flask of water. Your turn.

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